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ABSTRACT

The Master of Arts program in Communication (MAC) at Wichita State University is integrated and interdisciplinary. The assumption is that all professional communicators engage in gathering and analyzing information, and designing and delivering messages. The program, therefore, seeks to prepare students to engage in these activities across contexts by requiring a 15-hour core of communication theory and research methods. Beyond that, students are free to focus their coursework toward a particular context. The program is also interdisciplinary in that there are two emphases: communication, and theater/drama. So the pool of candidates from which the teaching assistants (GTAs) are chosen includes students whose undergraduate majors vary from speech to theater to advertising to journalism. Additionally, the majority of MAC students are part-time, nontraditional students. The average MAC student takes almost four years to graduate and is considerably older than most Masters level students. Many are mid-career professionals returning to school. To recruit possible GTAs, the program: has an updated Web site linked to that of the National Communication Association; advertises on a number of listservs; has developed and widely distributes a recruiting brochure; and urges that faculty speak about the program at professional gatherings and associations. Orienting the diverse group of GTAs that the program enrolls is really a process of socialization. Before the GTAs arrive, the Graduate Coordinator's role in orientation is two fold: to distribute information about the expectations of the program, and to try to answer whatever questions they might have about the program, the required GTA workshop, and so on. (NKA)

Recruiting, Selecting, and Orienting
Graduate Teaching Assistants
for the Basic Course in Oral Communication

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Recruiting, Selecting, and Orienting Graduate Teaching Assistants
for the Basic Course in Oral Communication

The Master of Arts in Communication, or MAC, program administered by the Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University is somewhat unique for several reasons. I'll discuss two of those reasons at length today, as they impact considerably on the topic of my paper: recruiting, selecting and orienting GTAs for the basic course in oral communication at Wichita State, or more specifically, Public Speaking.

First, the MAC program is integrated and interdisciplinary. It is integrated in the sense that it is not a Master of Arts in Speech or Print Journalism or Broadcast Journalism or Advertising or Public Relations or Electronic Media, but a Master of Arts in Communication. There are students in the program who will eventually enter all of these career fields, but we proceed from the assumption that all professional communicators engage in two activities: (a) gathering and analyzing information, and (b) designing and delivering messages. Therefore, our program seeks to prepare students to engage in these activities across contexts by requiring a 15 hour core of communication theory and research methods. Beyond that, they are free to focus their coursework toward a particular context.

In addition, the program is interdisciplinary in that there are two emphases in the Master of Arts in Communication: communication, as I've just described, and Theatre/Drama, which is actually a part of the College of Fine Arts. These students constitute a small, yet significant group among our MAC

students. So, the pool of candidates from which the GTAs are chosen include students whose undergraduate majors vary from speech to theatre to advertising to journalism, among others. Some of these candidates have strong backgrounds in performance of speech, while some have virtually no background beyond their own Public Speaking course, sometimes taken years previously.

The second unique aspect of the program is that the majority of our MAC students are NOT full-time traditional students. In fact, the majority of these students are part-time nontraditional students. Over the past five years, we averaged 58 declared majors per year, but we only graduated 17 majors per year. The average MAC student takes a little over four credit hours per semester and takes almost four years to graduate. Consequently, the average MAC student is considerably older than the traditional age for Master's level students. I mention this because a significant proportion of our GTA applicants begin with us as part-time students and make the transition to full-time status as GTAs. Last year, two of our six new GTA hires fell into this category. So, these part-time nontraditional students should be considered potential GTAs.

(Note: we hire approximately half of our GTAs each academic year, so that ideally, we have equal numbers of first and second year GTAs. This fact becomes significant later on when we hear about the experiences of a current GTA.)

In addition, we draw a substantial number of returning or mid-career professionals into our program. Among these are people who have been

working in journalism, marketing, advertising, training and development, or teaching speech in area high schools. For whatever reason (e.g., laid off, bored or unfulfilled in their jobs, etc.), these women and men decide to return to school to pursue an advanced degree full-time, but need some kind of income while they pursue their degree. These students are all potential GTAs. This fall, fully half of our new GTA class are communication professionals returning to school full-time.

So, in planning for recruiting, selecting and orienting GTAs, we deal with two factors that influence all of these processes. First, our program is integrated and interdisciplinary. Second, our potential GTA applicant pool contains a number of nontraditional students, many of whom are mid-career professionals returning to school on a full-time basis. These factors generate a potential pool of GTA applicants that is much more diverse than some programs might encounter.

How does this diversity affect recruiting GTAs? First, it affects the means that we use to recruit GTAs from the diverse pools of potential GTAs. When I initially assumed my responsibilities as Graduate Coordinator, one of the first things that I noticed is that we weren't doing much systematic recruiting for GTAs outside of those already familiar with the program, either as undergraduates or as part-time graduate students. For example, in some years, the Graduate Coordinator would send out a letter to chairs of area programs with some minimal information about the program. The Forensics Director would normally contribute a few candidates who could then work

with him on that program, but that was essentially it. In summary, we were recruiting most of our students from those already familiar with our program either by word of mouth or by virtue of the fact that they were already in the program. We were missing out on the possibility of recruiting full-time nontraditional students to join our GTA team.

Clearly, we needed to do more. We now have an updated website that is linked to NCA's website, we advertise our program on a number of listserves, we developed a recruiting brochure that we have distributed widely, and our faculty speak about the program at their professional gatherings and associations such as the Society of Professional Journalists, Advertising Federation, Public Relations Society of America, and so on. By the end of this academic year, I will have made three presentations at regional and national conventions about the program. Finally, we plan to purchase advertising space in our local business journal this summer to reach out to area professionals who might be contemplating making the leap to graduate studies.

In summary, we follow the traditional route to access the traditional GTA pool, but we also follow a different route to reach the potential nontraditional pool. I think that we've been successful in our outreach to these pools, as we received more GTA applications for the fall, 2000 semester than anyone can remember receiving for several years, and a significant number of these came from nontraditional students. As I noted above, half of the GTAs to whom we've made offers for the fall, 2000 semester are nontraditional students

who are leaving full-time careers as communication professionals to return to school full-time.

How does this diversity affect selecting GTAs? The integrated, interdisciplinary nature of the program, coupled with our blend of traditional and nontraditional applicants makes selecting GTAs an interesting exercise in comparing apples to oranges. While we can rely on factors such as undergraduate grade point averages, GRE scores (if we have them at that early stage, which we often don't), and letters of recommendation, it's difficult to compare students' backgrounds to assess their readiness for graduate studies in communication and/or service as GTAs in the basic course.

For example, if one were to screen applicants based on their experience in speaking performance classes, a significant number of otherwise worthy students would be rejected. Remember that many of our applicants have undergraduate majors in areas other than speech and some may never have had a performance class beyond a lower division Public Speaking class. However, students lacking in formal preparation often have extensive speaking experience in other contexts. For example, AD/PR undergraduates and professionals give presentations of their work on a regular basis, as do many communication professionals. So, the lack of a speech background doesn't necessarily mean that a student doesn't have speaking experience. Applicant reviewers just have to search for evidence of such experience in a student's transcript, in letters of recommendation, in job descriptions on resumes and so on.

Finally, how does this diversity affect orienting GTAs? Orienting such a diverse group of GTAs is a tremendous challenge. When I use the word orienting to refer to new GTAs, I'm really talking about the early phases of an ongoing socialization process in which the new GTAs join the faculty of the Elliott School, because that's how we think of it. The faculty share a set of values and engage in normative behaviors that we expect our GTAs to adopt. For example, the letter of appointment sent to new GTAs makes reference to the fall pre-session class in which all GTAs are required to enroll. A follow-up letter from the Basic Course Director confirms this commitment. If a student is unwilling or unable to attend the GTA "workshop," which is in reality GTA "boot camp," the offer of an assistantship is withdrawn. We do not allow GTAs to begin their program in the spring semester unless they have already taken the GTA course in a previous semester. The message is clear: "These are the expectations. Meet them."

The socialization process is a difficult one, as the GTA group is so diverse. As I've already mentioned, of the new GTAs, some are fresh from undergraduate school, barely out of their teens. Right alongside them are returning professionals with years of work experience, some old enough to be their parents. The two groups often have completely different needs. The traditional students often have an edge over the returning students in terms of study habits, familiarity with the library and, let's face it, energy. The nontraditional students often outscore the traditional students in terms of maturity, work ethic, relevant work experience and frankly, the more balanced

perspective that comes from just plain living longer. In addition, the kinds of authority problems faced by 20 year olds in the classroom are not usually faced by 30 or 40 year olds, particularly those with management experience.

The Graduate Coordinator's role in the orientation process is twofold and primarily occurs before GTAs arrive to begin the program: (a) to distribute information about the expectations of the program, both for them as students and for them as GTAs, and (b) to try to answer whatever questions they might have about the program, the GTA workshop and so on. These questions will vary widely (in some cases wildly), so my job is to either be able to answer or to be able to find an answer to whatever questions are thrown my way. Some answers are easily programmed, but many can not be programmed and have to be answered quickly on a case-by-case basis. I'm fortunate to have built up a network of experienced administrators and faculty on whom to call if needed.

All this diversity makes for an interesting two years for our GTAs and for the faculty, as well. In the papers that follow, you'll hear much more about the continuing socialization process as viewed through the eyes of the Basic Course Director, the person primarily responsible for guiding the GTAs through their teaching experiences. In addition, we'll hear the unique insights of a current GTA who will graduate this spring and pursue his doctoral studies at the University of Oklahoma in the fall.

Thanks for your attention!